

“Advent Joy” {outline}

Isaiah 35:1-6 (selected verses); *Acts 13:48-52*

December 13, 2020

- I. Introduction – 4:45pm
 - a. Remember the exact time when the fun of the holidays died.
 - b. Explain the difference between happiness and joy
 - i. If we make the joy of 2020 based on what’s happening, it may be a bit harder to pull off.
 - ii. We can still encounter joy though, through COVID 19, through anything which comes to pass.
 1. But in order to get there, we need to see what the Bible says about encountering joy
- II. Repentance brings joy
 - a. **Luke 15:7** – “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”
 - b. Reflection on repentance – the idea isn’t that we’re capable on this side of hereafter of being perfect, it’s that we by the power of the Holy Spirit, recognize our shortcomings and turn them over to God in repentance.
 - i. Shuv – literally, turning away from sin
 1. What do we need to turn away from in this Advent season?
 - a. Advent was originally a time of reflection and repentance, like a mini-Lent as we prepared for the coming of Christ.
 - b. Over the centuries, the mirth and merriment of the season largely overtook that reflective bent of the season.
 - i. I think it’s possible to do both.
 - ii. To rejoice and the reflect and repent.
 1. In fact, joy will only multiply in doing so.
 - III. The Lord's Word brings joy
 - a. **Psalm 19:8** – “the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;
 - b. **John 15:11** – “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”
 - c. Scripture reading data
 - i. Only about 1/3 of active Protestant members read the Bible every week. That means 2/3 of us don’t. What a wasted moment of joy.
 - d. Struggles in Ministry
 - i. Came out of seminary a far better theologian than a student of the Bible. In fact, it had gotten so bad that the only time I read the Bible was to prepare a sermon.
 1. It was, as you might imagine, a joy-less enterprise
 - ii. Life isn’t perfect, but it is at times more joyful.
 - e. Reading the Bible can be difficult. That’s what pastors and elders are for. They serve as helpers in your dedication to the Word.
 - IV. Prayer brings joy
 - a. **John 16:24** - Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.
 - b. Statistics on prayer
 - i. 20% of Christians pray daily.
 - ii. That means 80% don’t!
 - c. A spiritual life without prayer is certainly an arid faith, dry, devoid of depth or root.
 - i. I remember the first time I saw the joy of prayer...in someone else’s face.
 1. Rosary – 30 minutes of guided prayer on your knees on a kneeler.
 - a. I wasn’t ready. It was uncomfortable and I had no connection with Catholicism.

- d. I can think of no better way to begin and end a day than in the practice of prayer.
 - i. But again, this takes practice and discipline.
 - 1. If you're a scheduler, schedule time for it.
 - 2. If you're a mom or a day that just wants an extra 10 minutes of sleep, I understand, pray in the car on the way to work.
 - a. Prayer need not be some formal thing.
 - ii. Image - Woman at bus stop. Every day, she's just chatting away to someone on the phone as she walks her kid to the bus stop.
 - 1. I want to be like that with Jesus, just chattering away in prayer and taking time to listen, too.

V. The presence and fellowship of believers brings joy

- a. **1 John 1:3-4** – “that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”
- b. **1 Corinthians 12:26** – “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”
- c. Church family
 - i. Reject the idea of megachurches. Too sterile, too movie theater like.
 - 1. Hanging of the Greens – Cook a big vat of chili and people would filter in and out to decorate
 - a. There was no better feeling in the world than locking up that night, looking at the decorated church, feeling like we'd done something good and positive in the world.

VI. Giving brings joy

- a. **Psalm 37:21** – “The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives;”
- b. **2 Corinthians 8:1-5** – “We want you to know, brothers,^[a] about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints...”
 - i. Paul speaks here to a poor church that gave generously to the saints in Jerusalem (who were much poorer)
 - 1. They gave beyond the point of normalcy but their joy increased even though they had less stuff
 - a. That's a hard word to hear today.
 - i. We, too, like our stuff and aren't particularly anxious to let go of it.
- c. I think that of all the ones we've looked at, this one is probably the most difficult to get our heads around.
 - i. We like to think of it as our time, our money, our possessions
 - 1. But that's not really true.
 - ii. Further, by giving of ourselves, we intersect with a deep Joy.
 - iii. Once at a church I was serving, one of the members family members was in an accident in a town far away. This family was of limited means.
 - 1. Our church took up a love offering one Sunday morning. We quadrupled the amount required.
 - a. I have never seen a congregation more overflowing with joy than they did that day.

VII. Conclusion

- a. Never has to be a 4:45
- b. Joy of season can be never ending as we give more and more of ourselves to Jesus and, in turn, share more and more of us with the world.

Scripture

Repentance

Luke 15:7 – “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

The Word

Psalms 19:8 – “the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure enlightening the eyes.”

John 15:11 – “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

Prayer

John 16:24 – “Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

Presence and fellowship of believers

1 John 1:3-4 – “that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

1 Corinthians 12:26 – “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

Giving

Psalms 37:21 – “The wicked borrows but does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives.”

2 Corinthians 8:1-5 – “We want you to know, brothers,^[a] about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints...”

Sermon – “Advent Joy”

By the time I was thirteen or fourteen, I had identified a precise time when the happiness of Christmas ended. For me, at exactly 4:45pm on Christmas Day the fun of the entire season was officially over. Now it helps to understand that, by 4:45pm, every single Christmas gift I was going to get, including the trinkets in the stockings my Granny put together for us, had been opened. Additionally, by 4:45pm any toys or games or books or clothes I had received were now long-since old-hat and I was thinking more about what I didn't get and what I now wanted.

Needless to say, at that age, I had a woefully deficient understanding of the real joys that Christmastime offered. But the fact of the matter is we all have our 4:45pm when it comes to the merriment of the season. At some point, the tree will be carted off to the curb or shoved back into the attic, the lights will be de-strung off the bushes in the yard, the last cookie devoured from the decorative tins. Worse still, a great many people will revert back from their cheery Christmas-time personas into their every-day callousness. Even as we gather together and celebrate this holiday season, we all live in dread of our own 4:45pm. Even the best times of the holiday season are marred by the knowledge that all the mirth, all the merriment, all the happiness, all the JOY will soon come to a screeching halt.

But it doesn't HAVE to be that way.

In fact, as we've talked about previously, there are a host of ways in which the joy that many of us presently feel as we draw nearer to Christmas can continue and thrive in our lives. Our lives can be spent in continual rejoicing, in the best of times and on the worst of days. Rejoice in the Lord always, I say rejoice, St. Paul tells us in Philippians. And throughout the Scriptures, we're shown ways to make it all possible. But it takes figuring out the difference between the rather fleeting sensation of happiness and discovering that deep spiritual vein of joy which is available to us all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The aim of all the sermons is to help us all to locate that spiritual mother-lode.

Let us pray: O God our Father, we pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit, You would illuminate these passages of Your Holy Word for us. In hearing them read and proclaimed, lead us every more deeply into Your joy. Fill us with Your light that shines eternally so that we might bear it ever more steadfastly in the world. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-11: *“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. ⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁵ Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; ⁶ but you shall be called priests of the LORD, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. ⁷ Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. ⁸ For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. ¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.”*

Matthew 5:13-16: ¹³ *“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot. ¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. ¹⁵ No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,*

but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

1 Peter 2:1-10: “*Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ² Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation-- ³ if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. ⁴ Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵ like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." ⁷ To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," ⁸ and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. ⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

Many years back, Natalie and I went to a place in Tennessee called “The Lost Sea.” Now the lost sea isn’t really a sea, rather it’s a large body of water which exits in a cave about 140 feet below the surface. Not being a spelunker and generally finding the idea of caves rather creepy, it was my first journey down into the depths of the earth. As we ventured downward, down towards the underground lake, we stopped for a bit at the tour guides’ suggestion. The man told us he was going to introduce us to total darkness, saying that he doubted many of us had ever really experienced it before, that there were very few places where zero lumens were possible. So, he flipped a switch and off went the lights illuminating the cave. We were left there in absolute pitch blackness.

The lights remained off for about a minute. For one long minute we were all stranded there in the total darkness of the cave. At first, I thought it was cute. I even pinched Natalie. But then, as more seconds passed, the darkness became rather distressing. I knew where I was but began to feel a bit disoriented. I started wondering what it would be like if the lights failed to work. How would we get out?

Thankfully, the light did come back on. As the precious light flooded that cave, it cut through the darkness with a speed and power I’d never noticed before. In that moment, I was as grateful for light as I’d ever been before in my life.

To read the Scriptures is to enter a world of the opposing forces of darkness and light. The opening lines of Genesis teach us that, in the beginning, God created light. He separates the light from the darkness and declares light “good.” John’s Gospel instructs us that Jesus Christ is the light of the world and that darkness will never overcome it. In the final chapter of Revelation, we’re told that in the Kingdom of God, we will all live in God’s precious light forever and ever.

But we’re not there yet, are we? The Scriptures remind us all too frequently that you and I live in what Paul describes the meeting of the ages. And what St. Paul means is this – Christ has come, bringing his light into the world and one day, Christ will come again, leading us all into the eternal Kingdom of light. But for now, in this life, light and darkness continue to exist alongside with one another.

And we all experience this contrast in our lives ever too acutely.

We exist in a world with fantastic opulence on one end of the spectrum while a great many humans starve in homelessness and squalor. We live in a world which contains such natural beauty. Yet at the same time, many are quick to profit from this beautiful Earth’s destruction. This world contains saintly people, whose good deeds brightly radiate the love of God. These people coexist in a world seemingly more populated with exploiters and murders, the cruel and the vain. Light and darkness enjoined in a battle royal everywhere we turn.

And the sad fact of the matter is that the darkness occasionally even spreads its cloak over the churches of this country. Several years ago, I read a report out of Burlington in which the parks and recreation department discovered the greatest amount of cheating occurred in a church league. Most of the teams were stocked to the gills with ringers. A great many of these players not only didn’t attend the church they played for; they didn’t attend a church at all. Back in March I told you about a church in our Presbytery who denied several young women from the wrong side of the tracks the opportunity to participate in a “Ladies Tea” because a cabal at

church determined the young women weren't lady-like enough to meet their high standards. So, they were told not to come. Needless to say, that whole family never again returned to church. Finally, this past Easter we all read a story about a mega-church over in Charlotte who ejected a child with Muscular Dystrophy from their Easter morning worship ago because, according to them, he was distracting from other people's quote-unquote "worship experience."

And what makes such behaviors all the more ridiculous is to read them alongside Isaiah's words in the 61st chapter. There we discover the future God has in mind for his people. Isaiah writes "*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion.*"

Here, the prophet speaks a word of hope to people surrounded by darkness. These words come to the people of God as they live their lives in Babylonian captivity, carted off away from their homes into exile. There, in the spiritual darkness of their immediate surroundings, God's Word brings a ray of glittering light. A reversal of fortune is coming, Isaiah tells them. Mourners will rejoice, the oppressed will be freed, the brokenhearted comforted. One is coming to fulfill God's future for God's people.

And we know these words are significant. Jesus himself announces his ministry in the temple in the Gospel of Luke, quoting these verses of Scripture. Jesus tells the assembly at the synagogue that these words of prophecy have been fulfilled in him. In Him, the light shines in the darkness. Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus Christ set about accomplishing these ends told us in Isaiah. Jesus fed the hungry, consoled the brokenhearted, healed the sick and the infirm. He restored the lonely and the isolated healed into union with friends and families.

Jesus also drew together 12 souls, shaped them into disciples and sent them out two-by-two into the world to continue his ministry in new places. Everywhere the 12 apostles went they healed and cured and fed and announced the nearness of the Kingdom of God. They shone the light of Christ brightly in the world around them. Even after His ascension into heaven, the spirit of Christ came upon the earliest followers of Jesus, uniting their hearts tongues and sending them out to the ends of the earth to bear His light into the darkest corners of the world.

The Christian story is entirely, inextricably, permanently wed to the bearing of God's light into a world surrounded by darkness. In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, Jesus himself teaches us that *we together* are the light of the world. By the work of our hands and the sweat of our brow, our Good deeds done in Christ cut through the darkness of the world with the power of his eternal light. First Peter reminds us that we are a people, a royal priesthood of brothers and sisters in Christ who've been called out of the darkness into the light so that we might in turn be the light-bearers God created us to be.

In this age of light and darkness in which Christ bodily sits at the right hand of God the father, the church of Jesus Christ is entrusted with the task of light-bearing.

St. Teresa of Avila captures the intent of the people of God in the poem, Christ has no body; Christ has no body but yours, she writes: "No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours."

In His bodily absence, God in Christ wholly entrusts his light bearing enterprise to US. And the best part is this – when we do those things God himself has called us to do, we can expect to encounter a great measure of joy. You see joy, in the Scriptures, carries the idea of the excitement and exhilaration which comes as we engage in a great challenge. Nehemiah 8:10 teaches us the Joy of the Lord is our strength in the midst of struggle.

And what it all means is that one of the ways we can experience that joy we all long for is to dedicate our hearts and our minds, our bodies and our souls into the vocation for which we were created – light bearing. If ours are the hands and feet and body of Christ as His church, then it stands to reason that as we apply ourselves to doing the things He would have us do, we live into the fullness of what we were created to be. We may be lawyers and businesspeople, retirees and stay-at-home moms and students. Those are the things we do. And

yet who we are, what we are called to be, all of us, are disciples of Christ, intent on bringing light into the world.

Other things may amuse us for a while or keep a roof over our heads, but where we find our greatest joy is in doing those things which bring comfort and relief to others. We've all experienced this, I'm sure. As we care for those who are hurting, as we feed others, as we lift up the spirits of the brokenhearted, we step into the rightful role we were created to inhabit. Suddenly, life with all its weariness and complexity and its puzzles makes complete sense. Everything becomes just right.

It's what I like to call the Goldilocks effect. Goldilocks, as we all know, sat down to eat. The first bowl was too hot, the second, too cold and the third one was just right. Light-bearing is our just right bowl of porridge. All other things just don't work as well or as wonderfully.

Think of it like this – have you ever had a pair of shoes that seemed like it fit in the shoes store. But then, on your first major outing you knew something was amiss. I bought a pair of shoes once because I knew I was going to be walking all over a major metropolitan area. The pair I bought was supposed to be specifically designed for just that, so I spent more money than I was planning to get them. The first day out, traipsing around London I wore those shoes and after about 40 minutes, I began to feel a warming on the back of my heels. I ignored it at first, but then, the warming gave way into pain. By the end of the day, I took off my shoes to discover terrible blisters on both of my heels.

Thankfully, I had brought another pair of shoes, an older pair. Truth be told I don't know why I shoved them into my bag minutes before we left for the airport. But boy was I glad I had. I put those shoes on and WOW, did they feel and fit, just right. I wore them the rest of the trip and wondered why I'd even bothered to get a different pair of shoes to begin with.

I am convinced that when the people of God set about purposefully bearing Christ's light in the world, they experience just such relief. Such comfort. Such joy. We might well wonder why we tried anything else to begin with.

I want to share with a moment from Friday night that goes to prove my point. On Friday night, during concert years ago, I was sitting there in the back, right behind another one of the congregants at the church I was serving. At a certain point, the choir segued into Joy to the Word. It was beautiful. I know it moved me and others because I saw several folks, myself included, wiping tears of joy out of our eyes. But what really struck me, what really took my breath away, was seeing the faces of the people in the choir as they sang. They were so taken up into the beauty of the moment that they all were beaming these amazing smiles. Folks, those smiles simply flooded the room with the light of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Oh, and I've seen these same kinds of smiles before and they all seem to come when people are doing the very things Christ would have them do. I've seen beaming, radiant smiles break out at Vacation Bible School, everyday people work with children, teaching them about Jesus. I've seen them arise as our members return from taking meals on wheels. I've seen that joy erupt tangibly onto people's faces as they volunteer in any number of endeavors...

Simone Weil (see-MAHN vay) once wrote "If I light an electric torch at night, I don't judge its power by looking at the bulb, but by seeing how many objects it lights up...The brightness of a source of light is appreciated by the illumination it projects upon non-luminous objects...A Christian way of life is[only] appreciated by the amount of illumination thrown upon the things of this world."

There is a joy that is unmistakable which comes as we shine the love of our Lord brightly into the world. It cuts through the darkness and gloom of the world around us. United as a church of Jesus Christ, sharing his message of peace, hope and love to a world which is horribly bereft of such things we encounter the joy for which we were created.

And guess what?

Joy like this knows no 4:45pm. It isn't even confined to the month of December. It can even be experienced when our own lives are far less than perfect.

It's the joy that comes from following the light and bearing that light into the darkness around us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

